

PROMOTING ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION FOR FIRST-NATIONS STUDENTS

Since its inception, Université du Québec à Chicoutimi (UQAC) has been committed to developing a close and meaningful partnership with Quebec Aboriginal populations from the greatest possible number of communities and nations in order to facilitate First Nations' access to higher education. Today, this mission is being accomplished by the *Centre des Premières Nations Nikanite*, which is fostering recognition of the full importance of Aboriginal control of Aboriginal education.

BRIEF CONTEXTUAL OVERVIEW: A HISTORY OF INEQUALITIES

Certain data presented by Richards (2011) reveal substantial discrepancies in educational attainment between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal¹ peoples aged 25 to 34 years old at the secondary, college, and university levels. Other information from Statistics Canada (2011) seems to point in the same direction, but extends this age group to 64 years old. The following table provides an overview of the results of both studies.²

	ABORIGINALS	NON-ABORIGINALS	DISCREPANCY
Richards (2011)			
Young people 25 to 34 years old who did not complete primary or secondary school	35.0%	11.5%	23.5%
Young people 25 to 34 years old with a DEC	19.5%	26.2%	6.7%
Young people 25 to 34 years old with a university degree	8.6%	27.8%	19.2%
Statistics Canada (2011)			
Population 25 to 64 years old with a DEC	20.6%	21.3%	0.7%
Population 25 to 64 years old with a university degree	9.8%	26.5%	16.7%

Since 2000, a number of factors have been put forward to explain this disparity between the academic achievement of Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals. Although the blame was initially cast on the Aboriginals themselves, who were considered intellectually inferior or culturally disadvantaged,



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scarcely anyone today holds such views (Gauthier, 2005). Instead, the factors cited have to do with a clash of cultures that has resulted in a mutual ignorance of cultural features, teaching and learning methods, and group-specific codes of communication and information exchange. The presumed inadequacy or cultural insensitivity of schools is believed to have prevented the consideration of Aboriginal students' difficulties, which include being compelled to study in a second language, with no helpful or relevant literature, with inappropriate approaches, and, in addition, in a foreign environment.

Another frequently cited socio-historical factor in this regard is the anti-establishment attitude that Aboriginals have supposedly developed toward Western school, which they see as an ideological mechanism of domination and assimilation. This posture is believed to have been informed by the regrettable era of "residential schools," which were clearly intended to assimilate and evangelize young Aboriginals using methods that are overwhelmingly condemned today (Lepage, 2009).

Finally, these factors include the fact that the socio-economic conditions of Aboriginal communities are hindering their education systems' transformation, insofar as many of these communities lack the financial resources to undertake modern educational projects, for example (Huot, 2010).

SIGNS OF CHANGE

In 1972, a policy paper published by the National Indian Brotherhood (today known as the Assembly of First Nations) expressed the wish for a much-needed reform of First Nations' education, as reflected by the document's title, *Indian Control of Indian Education*. The main thrust of the text is clearly illustrated by the following excerpt:

"Indian parents must have full responsibility and control of education. The Federal Government must adjust its policy and practices to make possible the full participation

¹ In this article, the term "non-Aboriginal" is given a contextual definition; it is used in reference to the country's inhabitants who do not belong to Amerindian, Inuit, or Métis peoples.

² It is important to understand that these statistics show only the highest level of education completed. For example, a person who holds a college degree and university degree is only counted in the category of individuals who hold a university degree.



and partnership of Indian people in all decisions and activities connected with the education of Indian children” (Fraternité des Indiens du Canada, 1972).

In spite of a lack of coordination and cohesion, incredible strides have been made since the original article. First Nations manage most of their primary and secondary schools, and they have relative control over their curricula. The “band schools” located in and run by Aboriginal communities enjoy educational autonomy in several respects. For instance, for educational purposes, they may enter into special agreements with the federal government or other school boards, and even CEGEPs or universities; they draw up their own academic calendars; they take part in selecting courses, textbooks and instructional materials, which are usually designed to preserve their language and culture; and they are free to offer educational services in their native (Aboriginal) languages, in French, or in English (Commission de l’éducation, 2007).

When it comes to implementing administrative and educational choices, however, funding remains a crucial factor. Data from 2009 show that Canada is home to 515 Aboriginal schools funded by a mostly federal annual budget of \$689.4 million (CEPN, 2009). In Québec, thirty-four of its 62 band schools are entitled to funding from this budget. The other 28 belong to the Cree, Inuit, and Naskapi school boards, which receive financial assistance under funding agreements (MELS, 2009). This funding is a complex and controversial issue, as Aboriginal communities are generally under-funded compared to Quebec education institutions. In recent years, the Canadian government has affirmed its sensitivity to this situation and has drafted a related comprehensive proposal. Nevertheless, it wishes to make better funding conditional, which the First Nations of Quebec fear will be another way to undermine complete control of their education (Bastien, 2013). Finally, it is important to note that, even if they are well funded by the federal government and enjoy a measure of autonomy, Aboriginal communities generally choose to follow the guidelines of provincial academic programs in order to facilitate young people’s transition to postsecondary education, which is by and large offered in non-native institutions. This is understandable, given that degrees are awarded by the provincial ministries.

Moreover, given the still substantial gap in graduation and retention rates between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals, there is still work to do. The First Nations Education Council (FNEC) has proposed that legislation be adopted in favour of “quality education for all First Nations citizens” (CEPN, 2013).

In a recent presentation, FNEC asserted that a shift toward the full educational autonomy of Aboriginal peoples is inevitable and holds the key to genuinely closing the gap in education opportunities for Aboriginal communities.³ Even if the legislative framework setting out what FNEC considers to be “a governance project for an education system under the jurisdiction of First Nations” (2013) is still far from being adopted, it is unquestionably emerging.

In our view, when it comes to higher education, organizations such as Kiuna Institution,⁴ the First Peoples Pavilion at Université du Québec en Abitibi-Témiscamingue (UQAT), and the Centre des Premières Nations Nikanite at Université du Québec à Chicoutimi (UQAC) are already contributing to a sea change that is starting to swell, perhaps as a final step toward the comprehensive fulfillment of Aboriginal students.

■ HISTORY OF UQAC’S INVOLVEMENT

Long before 1972, at a time when Aboriginal peoples were demanding ownership of Aboriginal education by and for Aboriginal peoples, UQAC offered thematic courses in First Nations history, conducted related research projects, and provided enriched services for Aboriginal students. In 1973, thanks to the reformist momentum of the above cited policy paper, UQAC made a tremendous step forward in promoting First Nations access to higher education by taking part in the Collège Manitou project, an initiative funded by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND). The mission of this college, located in La Macaza in the Upper Laurentians, was to offer postsecondary education to Aboriginals in their native language with a view to strengthening their culture through daily contact between students, as well as to promote the autonomy of their communities and political and educational views (Janin, 2011). The UQAC focused on this autonomy by training Aboriginal teachers, who went through a six-week program leading to a certificate exclusively for teaching in Aboriginal communities. In spite of the enthusiasm of the students, teachers and administrators involved in the project, the DIAND’s funding of the Collège Manitou was withdrawn in 1978 owing to the latter’s administrative posture, which some judged to be too pro-autonomy or even subversive (Gauthier, Bacon, and Riverin, 2013).

Following its involvement in the Collège Manitou project, the UQAC concentrated on Aboriginals’ re-appropriation of

³ The Report on Priority Actions in View of Improving First Nations Education (2011) sets out a clear argument for this vision of taking charge of education.

⁴ For more information, see the article by Prudence Hannis in this issue of *Pédagogie collégiale*.



education and, in particular, it continued to distinguish itself by training Aboriginal teachers.

In 1991 UQAC established an official educational structure devoted to First Nations. Originally named the *Centre d'études amérindiennes*, the structure drafted the guidelines that continue to govern the existing centre today, which is known as the *Centre des Premières Nations Nikanite* (CPNN).

THE CENTRE DES PREMIÈRES NATIONS NIKANITE: AN ASSET FOR THE PROJECT OF GOVERNANCE IN ABORIGINAL UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

Since 2009, the CPNN's mandate has focused on these areas:

- The university education of Aboriginal persons in Quebec;
- The creation of programs that meet Aboriginal expectations;
- Research related to Aboriginal culture, and the subsequent dissemination of results;
- The quality of services deemed necessary or useful to Aboriginal education.

The CPNN is also a place of welcome, guidance, and advice for all First Nations students, and provides both information and academic support to help them complete their education.

Although they come from a variety of nations, the Aboriginal persons who attend UQAC are often Inuit or Attikamek and belong to communities located in proximity to Chicoutimi. Most of these students are enrolled in teaching, but they can also be found in a wide variety of other programs. Even if they are all proficient in French, at least as a second language, many are native speakers of Aboriginal languages.

A number of Aboriginal students also attend the UQAC campus in Sept-Îles, a city located near Innu communities on the North Shore. Most of the students on this campus study education, nursing, or business administration.

Since 1991, 535 Aboriginal students have graduated from UQAC. In light of the statistics on higher education in this population cited above, the CPNN has much to be proud of, especially considering that its Aboriginal enrolments are on the rise and that its retention rates are also encouraging.

ABORIGINAL STUDENTS' EDUCATION

Given that one of the CPNN's core missions is to facilitate access to higher education for First Nations students, it goes without saying that the centre has developed substantial expertise in the specialized programs that it offers, namely in the

disciplines and areas of First Nations' education, Aboriginal techno-linguistics, pluridisciplinary studies, helping relationships, socio-economic development, financial accounting, written French, and First Nations' history. Because most of UQAC's faculty members are not proficient in Aboriginal languages, the CPNN's courses are mainly given in French. As a result, the students are offered upgrading courses in French as a second language.

A PARTICIPATIVE PHILOSOPHY

The 2009 transition from the Centre d'études amérindiennes to the CPNN involved major ideological repositioning, primarily as a result of two important and meaningful initiatives. First, the centre adopted the designation of "Nikanite", meaning "to go forth" in Innu and Attikamek. This choice is very revealing of the philosophy that guides the CPNN. Second, an Aboriginal person was hired to manage the centre, bringing to mind the wish expressed in 1972 to achieve genuine "Indian control of Indian education." The new director's recruitment has had a positive impact both within the university community and among Aboriginal communities.

It is clear that the CPNN is more than ever adopting a unifying approach that entails a co-construction of Aboriginal educational perspectives. The attitude of an expert theoretician or holder of absolute knowledge has been put aside in favour of an approach of openness, listening, acknowledgement and understanding. In all of these ways, the Centre is addressing the needs of Aboriginal communities with utmost respect, and is uniting the Aboriginal and university communities to create new possibilities. This philosophy is primarily grounded in reality by the CPNN's *Conseil pédagogique* (pedagogical council). At least twice each year, the CPNN invites educational representatives from its students' communities to UQAC in order to learn about their experiences and to get a sense of what is going on in their communities from an education standpoint. During these sessions, which are presided by the CPNN director, the representatives gather together with various UQAC and CPNN professors, partners, employees, and students, including two Aboriginal students. The topics discussed include the communities' social and educational needs and the means to promote access to higher education. The participants also examine the effectiveness of established programs and adopt strategies to improve them. The *Conseil pédagogique* is a key part of the CPNN and its sessions serve as a democratic and respectful communication platform, ultimately leading to efforts that reflect the views and positions of the main stakeholders involved.



MEASURES TAKEN TO PROMOTE STUDENT SUCCESS

Partnerships aimed at developing appropriate education

The CPNN also works together with other UQAC structures, including the *École de langue française et de culture québécoise*.⁵ Thanks to this cooperation, the centre is able to offer upgrading courses in French, which is the second language of most of the Aboriginal students. The courses aim at preparing the students for university. Out of a concern for accessibility, certain courses are regularly offered directly within the communities. Approaching French as a second language is contextually appropriate, given that the resulting teaching strategies take into account the learners, their culture, and potential interference from their native languages. In an effort to adapt their instruction, CPNN teachers incorporate cultural elements into their educational activities, including dreams, Aboriginal art, and important figures from Aboriginal history. They are guided by a holistic approach that is more respectful of Aboriginal ways of learning. Indeed, for Aboriginal persons, the dimensions of being are not compartmentalized but interrelated (Colomb, 2012; Conseil canadien sur l'apprentissage, 2007). It is important to bear in mind that Aboriginal languages are “oral tradition” languages that transmit knowledge and the things of the past through observation and the spoken word (Lanoix, no date), hence the importance of teaching French to Aboriginals via practice and experience rather than a lecture-based approach (CPNN de l'UQAC, 2014).

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The CPNN has another partner in the UQAC's *Centre du savoir sur mesure*, which offers professional development programs adapted to the needs of various communities. More specifically, the CPNN calls upon this centre in order to develop programs that take Aboriginal realities into greater consideration. To give an example, the *Centre du savoir sur mesure* helped to develop a short undergraduate program in *Intervention jeunesse autochtone* in order to meet certain specific needs, namely offering courses in the communities through five-week intensive terms using instructional methods adapted to Aboriginal culture.

When discussing education adapted to Aboriginal realities, it is important to clarify that the CPNN and its partners cannot offer “discount diplomas” or lower their requirements. The

idea is always to develop specific or particular instructional approaches that are consistent with the academic standards that apply to all students. Actually, university preparation workshops are offered to the students in order to help them meet these standards from the start of their studies at UQAC. Among other things, these workshops address intellectual work methods that promote success. The students can also take advantage of French assistance and receive help from high-achieving peers.

Knowledge sharing

The CPNN's concern for the academic retention and graduation of First Nations students has had a positive impact across the province, especially thanks to the centre's initiative to organize an important symposium on this topic together with the MELS and UQAC. In March 2014, over forty presentations were delivered to an audience of more than 200 Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals from throughout Quebec. This major event was an opportunity to collectively reflect on the future of First Nations education in light of the expertise of numerous researchers, professors, students, managers and professionals. The symposium covered all levels of instruction, from kindergarten to university, and included the disclosure of research results, the sharing of newly developed educational materials, and the presentation of completed and ongoing projects in educational institutions. The issues addressed included the integration of traditional learning and French as a second language, the use of information and communications technologies, instructional support and more. One of the main strengths of the symposium was the importance it placed on what the Aboriginal students had to say. The participants especially appreciated the round table, in which a dozen Aboriginal university students related their educational paths, including academic difficulties, interruptions, resumptions and perseverance. In short, the event proved a very successful opportunity to connect research and experience, and a second edition has already been announced for the fall of 2015.

The CPNN is also undertaking another important academic project in collaboration with the MELS, the CEGEP de Baie-Comeau and the Pessamit Aboriginal community. The project is part of the Chantier 3 established by the MELS, which is aimed at promoting cooperation between different levels of

⁵ The UQAC's *École de langue française et de culture québécoise* offers immersion programs year round to allow students from all over the world to take advantage of a linguistic, cultural and human experience [<http://elf.uqac.ca/ecole-de-langue/>].



higher education. The project stretches over three years and is geared toward the following objectives:

- Understand the issues confronting Aboriginal students and their teachers in higher education
- Better identify the cultural issues, values, and academic concerns of Aboriginal students at CEGEP de Baie-Comeau and UQAC
- Identify the teaching, learning, and guidance strategies best suited to Aboriginal realities and most likely to support the CEGEP–university transition
- Develop an institutional intervention guide for college and university students and staff with a view to promoting Aboriginal students' success

CONCLUSION

In sum, since they demanded “Indian control of Indian education,” Aboriginal peoples have made tremendous strides in education, both in terms of administration and academic achievement. So much so, in fact, the Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples (2011) has referred to a move “from crisis to hope.” For the FNEC (2013):

“It is important that First Nations be able to develop their own standards and programs as means of supporting their actions toward regaining control of their education. First Nations must be able to decide their method of governance over their education and the structures equally involved in this at the local, regional, or national level.”

Considering the history and nature of the CPNN’s interventions in the area of higher education, we believe that that this centre is already helping to create a future mode of governance for Aboriginal university education. ♦

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